

No abortion for drug suspect

Minister inspires change of heart

By RUTH PADAWER
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What might have been Sonya Jackson's most private decision became her most public one.

Days after she told her public defender she was 5½ months pregnant and in need of an abortion, the whole world seemed to know her dilemma: As an inmate in the Somerset County Jail on charges of dealing heroin, Jackson couldn't make bail and therefore couldn't keep her appointment at an abortion clinic.

Her conundrum was propelled before the public when a Superior Court judge questioned her right to such a late abortion, even appointing an attorney for her fetus.

By the time the judge backed off and the 33-year-old mother of two was out of jail, she had changed her mind.

On Thursday, Jackson sat in the Gateway Pregnancy Center in her hometown of Irvington, surrounded by the men who have so influenced her over the past few days. Around her were racks of literature condemning abortion and promoting premarital abstinence and Christianity. "Do you know for sure that you are going to be with God in heaven?" asked one pamphlet. On a table nearby sat plastic life-sized models of fetuses at various stages of development. The one that is 20 weeks along, like Jackson's, looks like a small curled-up newborn.

"I asked God to help me decide, to send me some sort of sign when I was in jail," said Jackson, a tall, poised woman. Turning to her new friends, she said: "This is what he sent. They were my sign."

Overnight, Jackson went from being a poster girl for the pro-choice movement — the exemplar of a woman whose unquestionable right to an abortion was nearly blocked by abortion foes — to being a poster girl for the antiabortion movement, a woman saved from the evils of abortion once she focused on the thriving life within her.

In the ensuing fierce debate, each side accused the other of duping a vulnerable woman.

Jackson, however, says she doesn't want to be anybody's poster girl.

"Other people may see me as more than just Sonya Jackson, but I don't," she said. "Maybe I'm just Sonya Jackson with a little bit more direction and a little bit more insight on life."

Jackson became pregnant in mid-September, but says she didn't realize it until 2½ months later. "I didn't want another child. I thought: I'm done with the baby stage, that awful 2-year-old stuff, all that hard work. I wanted to go on with my life."

Quietly, she listened to her boyfriend's excitement, for it was to be his first child. Quietly, too, she made a



PETER MONSIEG STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER
Former inmate Sonya Jackson speaking with the Rev. Dean Gavaris at the Gateway Pregnancy Center after deciding against an abortion.

"I asked God to help me decide, to send me some sort of sign when I was in jail. This is what he sent."

Sonya Jackson

from her job as a phlebotomist, Jackson was arrested on charges of selling \$200 worth of heroin to an undercover officer.

From her cell, Jackson asked her mother to reschedule the abortion for February, by which time she figured she would be out on bail.

That appointment is scheduled for today, but Jackson doesn't plan to be there. That, in large part, is because of the Rev. Dean Gavaris.

As head of the Gateway Pregnancy Center, Gavaris appeared at Jackson's cell late Jan. 28, hoping to change her mind.

"I told her what an 18-week abortion involves," Gavaris said. "And I told her that 18 days after conception, you can pick up a fetus' heart-beat, and at 41 days, you can pick up brain waves, and at 7 weeks, that baby is sucking its thumb. Those were the types of things she needed to know."

They talked of the two sons she already had, one 4, one 9. And they talked of her other abortions. Gavaris enumerated the risks associated with abortion. He spoke of the emotional damage her mother and boyfriend would suffer, both of whom wanted her to stick with the pregnancy.

"I didn't go in there talking anti-abortion," Gavaris said. "I didn't say,



PETER MONSIEG STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Sonya Jackson, who reversed her decision to have an abortion, received an offer from a Fairfield attorney to pay \$300 a month in care until her child turns 18.

that's badgering, and women don't need to be badgered. Women need the facts. . . . That's what informed choices is all about."

Despondent, Jackson listened. That night, instead of sleeping, she mulled over her situation — her possible criminal trial, her dismal financial straits, the strain she faced with the two children she already had — and weighed it against Gavaris' contention that "This baby had a right to live."

Her ambivalence increased the next day, when the man appointed as her fetus' attorney described in detail how her fetus might be aborted.

Then late Friday afternoon, as Jackson's public defender worked to secure her release for the abortion, Gavaris visited again. This time, he brought concrete promises: In less than 24 hours, prominent antiabortion activists had collected enough for Jackson's \$2,000 bail and her \$4,600 in traffic tickets. Even more impressive was the offer, subsequently accepted, from a Fairfield attorney to pay \$300 a month for the child's care, until its 18th birthday.

By the time Gavaris left, Jackson

Quietly, she listened to her boyfriend's excitement, for it was to be his first child. Quietly, too, she made a Jan. 10 appointment for an abortion.

ing, Jackson walked into the waiting arms of her mother and Dean Gavaris. Within hours, she was whisked to an obstetrician, who showed her the fetus on a sonogram and pronounced it "a healthy little baby girl." Jackson was overjoyed; even the retelling sets her to weeping.

She has already picked out its name: Elvira Marie.

Yet for all her newfound joy at the prospect of motherhood, Jackson has not changed her stance on abortion rights. "Sure I'm pro-life," she said. "I would definitely like for everybody to keep their baby. But everybody's situation isn't the same. It's still a